Romanticism: 1830-1860 (more or less) name: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

No other period in English literature displays more variety in style, theme, and content than the Romantic Movement of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Furthermore, no period has been the topic of so much disagreement and confusion over its defining principles and aesthetics\*. Romanticism, then, can best be described as a large network of sometimes competing philosophies, agendas, and points of interest. [ . . . ] In America, the Romantic Movement [held] sway over arts 5 and letters from roughly 1830 up to the Civil War. [ . . . ] American literature championed the novel as the most fitting genre for Romanticism’s exposition. [ . . . ]

First and foremost, Romanticism is concerned with the individual more than with society. The individual consciousness and especially the individual imagination are especially fascinating for the Romantics. “Melancholy” was quite the buzzword for the Romantic poets, and altered states of consciousness were often sought after in order to enhance one’s creative 10 potential. There was a coincident downgrading of the importance and power of reason, clearly a reaction against the Enlightenment\* mode of thinking. Nevertheless, writers became gradually more invested in social causes as the period moved forward. Thanks largely to the Industrial Revolution, society was undergoing the most severe paradigm\* shifts it had seen in living memory. The response of many early Romantics was to yearn for an idealized, simpler past. [ . . . ] On top of this, there was a clearly mystical quality to Romantic writing that sets it apart from other literary periods. Of course, not 15 every Romantic poet or novelist displayed all, or even most of these traits all the time.

On the formal level, Romanticism witnessed a steady loosening of the rules of artistic expression that were pervasive during earlier times. The Neoclassical Period\* of the eighteenth century included very strict expectations regarding the structure and content of poetry. By the dawn of the nineteenth century, experimentation with new styles and subjects became much more acceptable. The high-flown language of the previous generation’s poets was replaced with more natural cadences and 20 verbiage\*. In terms of poetic form, rhymed stanzas were slowly giving way to blank verse, an unrhymed but still rhythmic style of poetry. The purpose of blank verse was to heighten conversational speech to the level of austere beauty. Some criticized the new style as mundane, yet the innovation soon became the preferred style. One of the most popular themes of Romantic poetry was country life, otherwise known as pastoral poetry. Mythological and fantastic settings were also employed to great effect by many of the Romantic poets. [ . . . ]

25 In the United States, Romanticism found its voice in the poets and novelists of the American Renaissance. The beginnings of American Romanticism went back to the New England Transcendental Movement. The concentration on the individual mind gradually shifted from an optimistic brand of spiritualism into a more modern, cynical study of the underside of humanity. The political unrest in mid-nineteenth century America undoubtedly played a role in the development of a darker aesthetic. At the same time, strongly individualist religious traditions played a large part in the development of artistic 30 creations. The Protestant work ethic, along with the popularity and fervor of American religious leaders, fed a literary output that was undergird with fire and brimstone.

The middle of the nineteenth century has only in retrospect earned the label of the American Renaissance in literature. No one alive in the 1850s quite realized the flowering of creativity that was underway. In fact, the novelists who today are regarded as classic were virtually unknown during their lifetimes. The novelists working during this period, particularly 35 Nathaniel Hawthorne and Herman Melville, were crafting densely symbolic and original pieces of literature that nonetheless relied heavily upon the example of English Romanticism. However, their work was in other respects a clean break with any permutation\* of Romanticism that had come before. There was a darkness to American Romanticism that was clearly distinct from the English examples of earlier in the century. [ . . . ]

The master of symbolism in American literature was Nathaniel Hawthorne. Each of his novels represents worlds imbued\* 40 with the power of suggestion and imagination. *The Scarlet Letter* is often placed alongside *Moby-Dick*as one of the greatest novels in the English language. Not a single word is out of place, and the dense symbolism opens the work up to multiple interpretations. There are discussions of guilt, family, honor, politics, and society. There is also Hawthorne’s deep sense of history. Modern readers often believe that [*The Scarlet Letter*](http://www.online-literature.com/hawthorne/scarletletter/) was written during the age of the Puritans\*, but in fact Hawthorne wrote a story that was in the distant past even in his own time. Another trademark of the novel is its dabbling in 45 the supernatural, even the grotesque\*. One gets the sense, for example, that maybe something is not quite right with Hester’s daughter Pearl. Nothing is what it appears to be in *The Scarlet Letter*, and that is the essence of Hawthorne’s particular Romanticism.

Separate from his literary production, Hawthorne wrote expansively on literary theory and criticism. His theories exemplify the Romantic spirit in American letters at mid-century. He espoused\* the conviction that objects can hold significance 50 deeper than their apparent meaning, and that the symbolic nature of reality was the most fertile ground for literature. In his short stories especially, Hawthorne explored the complex system of meanings and sensations that shift in and out of a person’s consciousness. Throughout his writings, one gets a sense of darkness. There is the sense of not fully understanding the world, of not getting the entire picture no matter how hard one tries. [ . . . ]

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As has been argued, Romanticism as a literary sensibility never completely disappeared. It was overtaken by other aesthetic 55 paradigms like Realism and Modernism, but Romanticism was always lurking under the surface. Many great poets and novelists of the twentieth century cite the Romantics as their greatest inspirational voices. The primary reason that Romanticism fell out of the limelight is because many writers felt the need to express themselves in a more immediate way. The Romantic poets were regarded as innovators, but a bit lost in their own imaginations. The real problems of life in the world seemed to be pushed aside. As modernization continued unchecked, a more earthy kind of literature was demanded, and the Romantics simply did not fit that bill.

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| Aesthetics (3): the study of and appreciation of beauty or artistic endeavors (poetry, music, painting, literature, etc.) | Enlightenment (11): A philosophical movement emerging out of Europe during the 18th century. The main idea behind the movement was the *revolutionary* belief that governments should be democratically elected and are instituted to preserve the natural rights people are born with. Hmmm. Sounds like something you should know about. | paradigm (12) (noun): |
| Neoclassical Period (17): Literary movement during the 18th century. It glorified and emulated the artistic styles of ancient Rome. | verbiage (20) (noun): | permutation (37): a way in which things can be varied; a rearrangement |
| imbue (39) (verb): | Puritans (43): a group of English Reformed Protestants in the 16th and 17th centuries who sought to "purify" the Church of England from its "Catholic" practices, maintaining that the Church of England was only partially reformed. We're going to have a big ol' introduction to these guys in class. | espouse (49) (verb): |

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**Major Writers of the Romanticism Movement**

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* [Whitman, Walt (1819-1892)](http://www.online-literature.com/walt-whitman/)
* [Poe, Edgar Allen (1809-1849)](http://www.online-literature.com/poe/)
* [Melville, Herman (1819-1891)](http://www.online-literature.com/melville/)
* Bryant, William Cullen (1794-1878)
* [Longfellow, Henry Wadsworth (1807-1882)](http://www.online-literature.com/henry_longfellow/)
* [Irving, Washington (1783-1859)](http://www.online-literature.com/irving/)
* Lowell, James Russell (1819-1891)
* Whittier, John Greenleaf (1807-1892)

1. What does it mean to be more "concerned with the individual than society" (7)?

2. What is blank verse? Why was it an important poetic style for the Romantics?

3. Google "American Renaissance 1840s" and look at least two sites. Write down two things you learn from those two sites.

4. We're going to learn a lot about the Transcendental Movement later this week. Briefly, Google it and learn what you can right now.

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